

## Chapter 7

# Cultural Politics, Reciprocal Relations, and Operational Agility in Online Drug Markets

*Nicolae Craciunescu and Nigel South*

### Abstract

Cryptomarkets or darknet marketplaces host multiple ‘vendors’ selling a variety of illicit products. The most sold and sought products on such markets are illegal drugs. These markets use cryptocurrencies as a payment system and provide participants with anonymity through their location on the dark web, and in recent years they have seen continuous growth in revenue and exchange. Existing literature has provided various explanations for this growth, but in 2017 the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction and Europol concluded in their 2017 ‘Drugs and the Darknet’ report that current interpretations of trends are not sufficient. This chapter will provide an alternative explanation for this phenomenon by considering web-based drug selling and purchasing in terms of trends towards ‘Uberisation’ and ‘McDonaldisation’ and applying Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital to the discussion of the dynamic cultures of consumption and different subcultures of the drug world.

*Keywords:* eBayisation; Uberisation; McDonaldisation; cultural capital; rituals; drug cultures

---

Digital Transformations of Illicit Drug Markets: Reconfiguration and Continuity, 95–107



Copyright © 2023 by Nicolae Craciunescu and Nigel South. Published by Emerald Publishing Limited. This work is published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence. Anyone may reproduce, distribute, translate and create derivative works of these works (for both commercial and non-commercial purposes), subject to full attribution to the original publication and authors. The full terms of this licence may be seen at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode>  
doi:[10.1108/978-1-80043-866-820231007](https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-80043-866-820231007)

## Introduction

The marketing of ‘drugs’ is usually concerned with either medicinal preparations or chemical compounds consumed primarily for hedonistic purposes and their physiological or psychological effects. Both these categories are controlled by laws through either medical prescription or legal proscription, and discursive practices of pathologisation and criminalisation reflect the hegemony achieved by the medicalisation of drugs, making it difficult for drug consumption to be described in terms other than those of medicine or epidemiology (Maitena et al., 2011). This tends to exaggerate the importance of individual characteristics compared to socio-cultural factors such as contexts and cultures of exchange, supply, and consumption. This chapter considers studies of cryptomarkets in terms of a cultural approach to the study of drug consumption and marketing in the digital age and argues that cryptomarket vendors are predominantly individuals with cultural capital belonging to the different subcultures of the drug world rather than the criminal or street culture, but they are not a homogeneous ‘group’ and instead reflect different motives and styles regarding activity on the dark web.

## Background

According to Decorte (2011), the scientific paradigms, methods, and tools that have dominated the study of drug use and addiction – epidemiology, psychiatry, neurobiology – have tended to individualise and de-contextualise the cultural patterns of drug consumption, making psychoactive substances ‘culturally innocent’. This ‘pharmacocentrism’ led to a marginalisation of other approaches to the study of drug use (such as anthropology, sociology, history, and cultural and gender studies). The study of markets is also dominated by a particular disciplinary approach, in this case, economics, and relatively few studies have been done thus far on actors’ motives and choices regarding the use of cryptomarkets from a sociological or cultural rather than economics perspective (Dwyer and Moore, 2010; Moeller, 2018). In cryptomarket studies (EMCDDA & Europol, 2017), early socio-cultural perspectives focused on the now-closed Silk Road site, the first such marketplace (Barratt et al., 2014; Van Hout and Bingham, 2013a, b, 2014), which was representative of a population that was interpreting their activity as a form of socio-political movement (Maddox et al., 2016; Munksgaard and Demant, 2016). Studying drug markets from a cultural perspective has been fruitful in various ways (Autio et al., 2016; Collins, 2011; Duff, 2003b; Hunt et al., 2011; Moeller and Sandberg, 2019; Pilkington, 2007; Sandberg, 2012, 2013a; Sandberg and Fleetwood, 2017; South, 1999a), and this chapter draws on this work.

In terms of methods, as Ritter (2006, p. 454) notes, taking an ethnographic or qualitative approach to understanding drug markets illuminates their complexity, fluidity, and the processes of change related to interactions with competitors, consumers, and law enforcement (see, e.g., Dorn et al., 1992). Furthermore, the ‘rich descriptions of diverse drug markets in constant change’ that are produced can

provide salutary lessons for other disciplines. For example, economists trying to specify the elasticities of supply and demand may need to exercise caution in specifying the market type and timeframe. (Ritter, 2006, p. 454)

Attempts to ‘delineate differences’ between ‘types’ of drug dealers or markets can, according to Potter (2009, p. 52), ‘gloss over the complexity of drug distribution and the overlap and interplay between what come to be seen as different patterns of supply’, and this applies to the digital marketplace as much as the offline market.

Financial resources are still the key to being able to consume and the levels at which this can be engaged, but by bringing to a screen on a laptop or desk items that may previously have been out of reach (for reasons of geography or fear of contact with ‘undesirables’ – criminals or police), cryptomarkets join the wider (legal) market moves towards making home shopping and doorstep deliveries a normalised activity (even more so as a result of retail changes responding to the COVID-19 pandemic). Here, we do not refer to drug purchase and use as necessarily ‘normalised’ in a ‘static’ sense (Pennay and Measham, 2016), but rather as a part of dynamic cultures of consumption, playing a role in identity construction processes alongside other consumption practices that may otherwise be licit (Askew, 2016; Duff, 2003a; South, 2004). This reflects a cultural (South, 1999b) or differentiated (MacDonald and Marsh, 2002) normalisation, reflecting the high volume of practices, references, and imagery concerning drugs and drug consumption across the social landscape and everyday discourse. The construction of identity or the ‘self’ through consumer goods and branded commodities is partly enabled by the values and properties attributed to these goods through cultural politics, reciprocal relationships between consumers, marketing, and brand management. This chapter aims to explore how such processes have helped to shape cryptomarkets.

In the following sections, we first discuss the connection between consumer culture, branding, digital information systems, and the countercultural movement of the 1960s and 1970s and parallels with (at least the beginnings of) the cryptomarket scene. We then move to the development of darknet marketplaces and analyse some of the main elements they are comprised of. Finally, we outline how the cultural study of drugs has proven fruitful and how this could be applied to cryptomarket studies.

## **History: From Counterculture to Cyberspace**

Going back to the libertarian beginnings of cryptomarkets, when the Silk Road was formed of a population of ‘natives to digital cultures such as gamers, cypher-punks, cryptonerds, phreakers and cyber-libertarians’ (Maddox et al., 2016, p. 115), drug consumption may have also played a role in the identity construction processes of these actors who were spending more of their time in online communities. This online environment provides emotional excitement and chains of interaction (Collins, 2004, 2011), enabling the sharing of drug experiences under

conditions of perceived anonymity without the social stigma that might affect users sharing such information in their offline social circles. Using the online environment as a means to ‘build a new world’ in combination with the ideas revolving around drug consumption (Maddox et al., 2016) is, however, not a new phenomenon. The hackers and radical political activists of the counter-cultural movement of the 1960s were among those who inspired and shaped the creation of the personal computer industry (Markoff, 2005) and the world of information we live in today (Collier et al., 2021, pp. 2–3).

The research culture of the military–industrial complex that emerged during World War II continued its growth through the Cold War era and was, in many ways, ideologically narrow and myopic. However, it was also open to new, interdisciplinary, free-wheeling, and highly entrepreneurial styles of work and willing to embrace new organisational concepts, such as seeing institutions as living organisms, webs of information, and social networks. In the same period, the developing ‘counterculture’ represented a rejection of the conservative values and authority of the military and corporate power elites and celebrated the idea of transcendence – that limits could be challenged (Reich, 1970). This was expressed in critiques of the influence of what Reich (1970, p. 88) called ‘the corporate state’, which encouraged artificiality and untruths and wasteful or fraudulent ‘boondoggle’ projects of big business and government (Markoff, 2005, p. 126). Calls for new ways of living and interacting led to experiments in creating alternative spaces and rural communities, to rejecting traditional political mechanisms and the corporate or industrial ‘low tolerance’ of ‘truths that challenged the mission or profits of the company’ (Markoff, 2005, p. 188), and a turn to holism rather than systems that required psychologically fragmented specialists (Turner, 2006). Importantly, in terms of tracing the legacy of the cultural politics being formed at this time, today we can see ‘curious mutations of the California counterculture’ (Shaw, 2021) in the visions and ambitions of various modern libertarians such as Peter Thiel (2009), founder of Paypal and co-founder of the CIA-backed big data start-up Palantir (which nowadays offers data-mining services to law enforcement agencies, resulting in racial profiling), who has championed online market culture as a space of freedom and criticised state sovereignty over people and places.

According to Markoff (2005), the seeds of today’s digital culture were planted in the LSD scene of the 1960s counterculture, providing the thread of continuity to the idea of embracing a means to achieve disembodied experiences that could unite the world through interconnectedness in a space outside consciousness (Markoff, 2005). Other actors involved at this moment and movement were radical entrepreneurs interested in forming information networks with researchers, hackers, and the rural communes, which led to significant developments in science, technology, and business models. For those involved in these networks of hippies, entrepreneurs, hackers, engineers, and social scientists, the Internet or cyberspace was an idea that was supposed to

flatten organizations, globalize society, decentralize control, and help harmonize people. States too would melt away, their citizens lured back from archaic party-based politics to the ‘natural’ agora

of the digitized marketplace. Even the individual self, so long trapped in the human body, would finally be free to step outside its fleshy confines, explore its authentic interests, and find others with whom it might achieve communion. Ubiquitous networked computing had arrived, and in its shiny array of interlinked devices, pundits, scholars, and investors alike saw the image of an ideal society: decentralized, egalitarian, harmonious, and free. (Turner, 2006, p. 1)

The personal computer, and later the Internet, were to be tools of liberation from the static, corporate-controlled mainframes serving limited communities. This line of liberation ideology leads eventually to cyberspace and the darknet, and these trends can be seen as

bound to strong currents of both techno-utopian and techno-dystopian visions of possible futures, in which advanced information and communication technologies possess both radical capacities for democratization, free anonymous expression, and the redistribution of power to the masses, and simultaneously terrifying potentials for control, subjugation and surveillance. (Collier et al., 2021, p. 3)

Versions of these ideas, values, and ethics are reported in the study of the discourse of participants in the Maddox et al. (2016) sample, and before that, with an emphasis on drug activism, in the samples of Van Hout and Bingham (2013a, 2013b, 2014).

### ***Continuity and Change in Darknet Marketplaces: Uberisation, McDonaldisation and eBayisation***

Darknet marketplaces or cryptomarkets have been defined as

a marketplace that hosts multiple sellers or ‘vendors’, provides participants with anonymity via its location on the hidden web and use of cryptocurrencies for payment, and aggregates and displays customer feedback ratings and comments. (Barratt and Aldridge, 2016, p. 1)

The darknet or dark web is the part of the Internet that can only be accessed through encryption software. The most popular software used is The Onion Router (Tor), originally developed by the US Naval Research Laboratory to provide a secure communication tool and now made available by a non-profit organisation, partially funded by civil liberties groups, the US government, and contributions from millions of Internet users – varying from IT professionals, military personnel, bloggers, journalists, law enforcement, whistle-blowers, and activists to day-to-day users – who wish to enhance their online security and

browse securely and anonymously (Tor Project, 2019). Tor and the so-called 'dark' web are not inherently 'criminal' software and online mediums. They have been created and are being employed for a variety of reasons and purposes by a diverse range of users. However, in 2011, one particular entrepreneur (Chen, 2011) realised that this environment, together with the newly available cryptocurrency Bitcoin (Nakamoto, 2008; Rauchs and Hileman, 2017), could provide just the right affordances (Hutchby, 2001) to create an online platform where buyers and sellers of illegal goods could run their activities with a minimised risk of detection or intrusion.

The two key underpinnings of cryptomarkets, Tor and Bitcoin, are politically strongly related to both libertarian and anti-establishment ideas. They enable the circumvention of oversight by state and legal institutions (government, law enforcement, banks) and (ideally) transfer power to the Internet user (or the citizen). According to several studies, the Silk Road, the first cryptomarket, was clearly tied to such political aims and to a libertarian ideology. Maddox et al. (2016), in their ethnography of the Silk Road and several other darknet platforms, have argued that for website users, what was being made available was not only a virtual *place* to trade drugs but an *experience* of shared personal freedom and exposure to a libertarian political outlook and framework. In a practical sense, users could also share knowledge about drug use and cryptography. Thus, what was – or is – on offer is a world 'not yet' made, promising the possibility of a different 'reality', but also the means to confront the way in which existing political and social reality works (Maddox et al., 2016).

Munksgaard and Demant's (2016) quantitative study, which used topic modelling to identify the political discourse on multiple cryptomarket forum posts from 2011 to 2015, has shown similar results. The prevalence of the political libertarian discourse increased from 2011 until the end of the Silk Road in 2013, which was then followed by an abrupt change in the discourse. Therefore, it is arguable that even if the first major law enforcement operation against the biggest cryptomarket at the time did not have a major effect on the sustainability of the economy of cryptomarkets, it did seem to have a dampening effect on the political sentiments of users.

If the political ideology behind any given cryptomarket is put aside, however, the elements which comprise a cryptomarket will still have an instrumental role. For example, the success of a cryptomarket is dependent on customers, so feedback ratings and comments that build a reputation are important. These elements create a system of trust (see Moeller, this volume) which gives potential buyers and sellers reassurance about doing business with each other without being afraid of losing their money or product (Tzanetakis, 2018b; Tzanetakis et al., 2016). The need to maintain reputation and trust motivates the seller to conduct business professionally but, given the competitive nature of the market, these characteristics may not be enough to generate high returns (Tzanetakis, 2018a). The competition also drives the selling of reliable quality products that can be marketed or branded as high purity and high strength (Caudevilla et al., 2016; van der Gouwe et al., 2017).

However, it is also the case that purity does *not necessarily* mean quality, especially in the case of substances that may have the potential to cause harm. The concept of drug quality in this context has been explored by Bancroft and Scott

Reid (2016) in their qualitative study of cryptomarket users which showed how users create an online culture of consumer quality evaluation by sharing their experiences and feedback on forums, creating an environment where drug safety and harm reduction are being discussed and assessed openly and freely.

According to Aldridge et al. (2018), cryptomarkets are increasing the amount, the range, and the purity of drugs being sold, which could increase their potential harm, although, at the same time, most cryptomarkets and their associated forums provide information on drug safety, customer reviews of drugs from different vendors, and other advice. Thus, one argument could be that cryptomarket vendors and users share a commitment to increasing drugs availability and to reducing harm, which could lead to less drug-related harm arising from cryptomarkets than from traditional street markets. In support of this, Martin (2018) argues that cryptomarkets take drug sales to a level of ‘gentrification’, displacing the potentially violent norms of traditional markets with friendly and professional relationships between online market actors, thereby further reducing harm. This points towards a drug market population that is rather more concerned about the quality and the safety of drug use than the more instrumental, financial side of the market, such as the maximisation of profit from a user or a seller point of view. A significantly lower risk of victimisation by violence (although there is evidence of online-specific violent behaviour, such as scams, threats, or doxing; see Moeller et al., 2017) and an increase in the transparency of vendor-buyer relations and the quality of the products being sold make this virtual environment a more appealing one for certain drug buyers.

Aldridge and Décary-Héту (2014) have argued that, at least on the Silk Road, many transactions seemed to be ‘business-to-business’ given the volume of drugs being sold, and therefore cryptomarkets may be servicing a shift in criminal innovation that could re-shape the market by eliminating the need for ‘middle’ level drug dealing, connecting the upper with the retail level dealers, the cryptomarket itself acting as a ‘middle’ level. Thus, the type of ‘subcultural capital’ (Sandberg, 2008) required to deal drugs may be different in traditional markets compared to cryptomarkets. This strengthens the ‘gentrification hypothesis’, considering that the violence that was necessary to gain market share, protect territory, and resolve conflicts required in the offline world (Sandberg, 2008) is replaced in online marketplaces by a need to demonstrate good customer service and satisfy the needs of customers (Martin, 2023, Chapter 9).

Smaller ‘retailers’ can enter the market to sell, and socially based buyer groups can enter to purchase and distribute. Arguably, the trading position and practice of both groups reflect a process of ‘Uberisation’ in the digital market. For example, in their discussion of the growth of the European cocaine trade, the EMCDDA (2019) observes that:

Smaller groups have been able to enter the market by using a range of information technology like encryption, darknet market places, social media for dealing and cryptocurrencies. Entrepreneurship in the competitive cocaine market is evident from innovative distribution strategies [...]. These new methods appear to reflect to

some extent the type of disruption seen in other areas facilitated by the common use of smartphones – a potential ‘Uberisation’ of the cocaine trade – a competitive market in which sellers compete by offering additional services such as fast and flexible delivery options. (p. 14)

Warren and Ryan (2023, Chapter 4) agree that

dark web markets are a form of ‘Uberisation’ of drug distribution that simply speeds up the communication process between willing consumers and suppliers, while utilising rather crude methods of transportation through conventional mail systems.

This may have inappropriate consequences in terms of criminal justice attention in the same way that ‘social supply’ has often been policed and prosecuted as if it entailed organised crime (Coomber et al., 2016, p. 263). As Warren and Ryan observe,

many relatively innocuous forms of low-level drug trafficking service small markets of friends and risk becoming labelled by law enforcement as highly serious because they utilise the dark web for transnational drug distribution.

In this version of the markets of the dark web, forms of social supply have gone online, becoming a digital extension of the underpinnings of ‘normalisation’ that Parker et al. (1995, p. 25) described as the supply of drugs among friends and acquaintances in which drugs had ‘become products which are grown, manufactured, packaged and marketed through an enterprise culture whereby the legitimate and illicit markets have merged’. In this context, digital markets are appealing because there has been an increase in the acceptability of recreational drug use and of social supply, and of the exchange of drugs on a scale different from financially motivated drug dealing. The person ordering drugs online may just be the ‘designated buyer’ for a group, reflecting the continuity of a social practice noted in many studies over the decades (Blum et al., 1972; Coomber et al., 2016; Murphy et al., 1990) where, once an individual became known as someone who potentially had access to drugs, they swiftly became the main point of supply. With requests from friends to ‘get in on the deal’, it ‘made sense’ for everyone (economically) that social suppliers should purchase for them at the same time (Coomber et al., 2016, p. 6). Masson and Bancroft (2018, p. 81) have discussed social supply and sharing in relation to both online as well as offline markets, and report that ‘our findings call on us to rethink how significant non-commercial supply is even in a vaunted fully capitalist market’. Within networks of illicit drug distribution, friendship or acquaintance groups arrange distribution among themselves for low or no profit via social supply and minimal commercial distribution (Coomber et al., 2016). According to Masson and Bancroft (2018, p. 81), this kind of distribution is also characteristic of cryptomarkets, involving



knowledge transfer and a ‘form of sharing’ that ‘becomes transformative in this context’, meaning that when a

cryptomarket buyer shares his or her wares with ... friends, it is not a gift *per se*. It is part risk-management and part deal. Sharing has a role in the construction and maintenance of social order.

If these trends are in part a reflection of the recent market model of Uberisation, only made possible by technology, they are also traceable to an earlier model of innovation and change in business operations – McDonaldisation. This was based on the application of principles of efficiency, calculability, control, and predictability to a fast-food franchise business that permeated popular culture and was easily reproducible. As Ritzer (2019, p. 67) notes, in the earliest forms of McDonaldisation, bureaucracy, industrial organisation, and the assembly line were common characteristics – and these were extended and refined in the case of his classic example of fast-food restaurants. The impact of the model has been profound, and over time, the business operations of the offline world have changed as agility and technology influenced organisational shape. For the new online world, success was also built on being able to avoid some of the constraints of a physical business operation – although as Collier et al. (2021) point out, the burden of actually doing mundane and boring work remains a necessity in the digital as much as the physical world, as the case of Amazon would demonstrate. Indeed, as Ritzer (2019, p. 55) observes, regardless of changes to operations, people ‘still exist in and on these settings’ as ‘consumers (or customers, clients) and producers (or workers)’, although ‘it is important to note that people as exclusively producers are of declining importance in material sites and virtually non-existent on digital sites’ as the provision of services and related administration have become dominant economic activities. Nonetheless, the point is that the platform economy is a perfect base from which to launch and run enterprises that are employee- and asset-light, and, says Ritzer, it is this ‘lightness’ in both paid employees and assets that allows Internet sites to reach new heights of McDonaldisation and with ‘relatively few employees and minimal material assets, Internet sites are freed to maximize the process of McDonaldisation’. Of course, online markets characterised by an ideology rather antithetical to corporate McDonaldisation may also seem to have something in common with the eBay phenomenon which, as Ahuvia and Izberg-Belkin (2011, p. 374) suggest, thrives on ‘individuation’ and ‘self-assertion’ by

creating experiential and interactive platforms that bring together a zealous community of buyers and sellers, where an endless variety of products and props are offered to consumers busy scripting their own characters.

While drawing on certain features of a McDonaldised operation to present a reliable menu (of drugs) with efficiency and guarantee of predictable quality, drugs cryptomarkets also seem to reflect some characteristics of the eBay market place as a

consumption playground [...] allowing consumers to devise products, create original commercial narratives, pursue ideological agendas, and make artistic statements while feeling empowered through the process. (Ahuvia and Izberg-Belkin, 2011, p. 374)

### ***Drug Cultures, Social Motives, and Reciprocal Relations***

Studies of cryptomarkets may reflect various disciplinary or theoretical orientations that are not primarily concerned with the cultural features of markets but are nonetheless illuminating because of the light they shed on matters such as learning, choice, politics, and motivation. The experiences of buyers and sellers; the influence of libertarian politics; the choice to favour online markets to avoid violence and law enforcement operations; and the commitment to harm reduction and drug safety, quality, and sharing of information all point towards cryptomarket users as having cultural capital (Whenua, 2017), being less likely to belong to the culture of the street (Sandberg and Fleetwood, 2017) but having instead an affinity with a culture of commitment to availability and use of drugs.

To take an illustrative study, Sandberg (2012) describes the differing cultural backgrounds of cannabis dealers based on the type of market they are selling in: public, semi-public, or private. In the public market, products are being sold in public spaces, parks, or streets; in the semi-public market in clubs, cafes, or pubs, while in the private market, the selling takes place behind closed doors (e.g. where the dealer lives). Actors from the public market are profit-driven, belonged to the street culture before getting involved in cannabis selling, and are more likely to scam customers based on their knowledge of the products and markets (Jacques et al., 2014). In the private market, on other hand, profit making is frowned upon, and the dealers belonged to the cannabis culture before getting involved in selling it, which means they have an ideological commitment to the culture as part of their reasons for selling cannabis. The semi-public market is more or less a combination of the two, where even if actors are seeking profit, they generally build a connexion or reciprocal relationship with the buyers, either through common cultural knowledge or by sharing anecdotes in a social context (Sandberg, 2012). These market actors are bringing their cultural capital to the market they belong to and are selling their products with an accompanying symbolic meaning which is being both ideologically 'bought into' and transactionally bought by their clients. Similar actors and motives can be found in Dorn and South's (1990) categorisation of types of drug distributors which includes 'opportunistic irregulars' (individuals or small groups that get involved in a variety of activities in the irregular economy, including drug dealing), 'mutual societies' (friendship networks of user-dealers who support each other, buying, selling, and sharing drugs in a reciprocal manner), and 'trading charities' (enterprises involved in the drug trade because of their ideological commitments to certain drugs, as well as the profit). Sandberg's (2012) private market actors would easily fit in the category of mutual societies or trading charities. In the case of cryptomarkets, Demant et al. (2018) argued that, based on their observed demand for drugs (measured

in terms of reviews on two of the marketplaces that followed Silk Road – Silk Road 2 and Agora), most of the drug deals taking place were for personal use or social drug deals, supporting the proposition that middle-level drug dealing was giving way to the operation of cryptomarkets (see also Aldridge and Décary-Hétu, 2014) but also pointing towards the fact that a proportion of cryptomarket buyers would belong to ‘trading charities’ as the amounts purchased were more in line with social supply drug deals. Indeed, in the case of cannabis, Demant et al. (2018) have seen a significant tendency towards larger purchases, which could mean that a significant number of the buyers are actors from the private cannabis market similar to Sandberg’s (2012) sample – not aiming for profit but for effective distribution of something they see as (literally) a consumer ‘good’.

### ***Drug Cultures, Representations, and Rituals***

Different drugs may belong to different cultural and subcultural moments and movements but not function as defining elements of the subculture itself. Shapiro (1999) points this out in a discussion of the affinities between certain types of drugs and the different musical movements of the twentieth century in the UK and the USA. For example, in the early 1960s, amphetamine was popular amongst the subculture of ‘mods’ and fans of The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, and The Who, and again in the 1970s among punks who copied icons like Johnny Rotten, the lead singer of the Sex Pistols (his name being attributed to the decayed teeth that result from heavy amphetamine consumption). Around the mid-1960s, cannabis and LSD started to gain popularity as well with the rise of psychedelia, accompanied by outdoor festivals and the counter-cultural movement. The 1980s saw a rise in the consumption of a new amphetamine relative, MDMA, at the same time as the house and garage music were emerging from the USA and Ibiza. All of these subcultural movements, while having certain types of drugs associated with them, do not necessarily represent the context in which these particular drugs are *always* consumed, and, of course, Shapiro’s focus on transatlantic cultural exchanges and influences may now seem limited in a world so dominated by web and social media connectivity. This has implications for how we should think of ‘sub’ cultures, where their genesis and characteristics may no longer be as localised or related to lack of capital as in the past. Reputation and symbols, messages, and beliefs are now so easily shared on a wide scale, and this could apply to those who use drugs cryptomarkets.

The context of consumption also changes the meaning. Collins (2011) argues that a theory of interaction ritual(s) has the potential to explain whether and why psychoactive substances might be accepted and regarded as legitimate (e.g. caffeine), contested by opposing ideologies and/or rival movements (e.g. alcohol prohibition), or subject to taboo and popular scorn (p. 114). This approach sees drug subcultures as rich repositories of ‘rituals, stories and symbols’ and might be applied to the analysis of the branding and marketing of the wide variety of substances sold by darknet vendors, to the contexts of consumption they are ‘recommending’ through their advertising, and to the exploration of social situations in which substances are ingested. A study by Cunliffe et al. (2019) on non-medical

prescription psychiatric drugs and their availability on cryptomarkets explores some aspects of this approach. Their analysis shows that alprazolam (commercially known as Xanax) is the best-selling benzodiazepine anti-anxiety product in the USA and is showing sales growth in the UK and Australia. This popularity rests on an established reputation, with use dating back to the early 1980s, but Cunliffe et al. also argue that there are powerful cultural amplifiers of reputation, such as significant mentions of Xanax in the US rap scene (e.g. related to it being the cause of death of rapper Lil Peep; the musician Lil Xan who discusses his struggle with Xanax addiction yet retains a stage name based on the drug). Moreover, the level of cultural transmission between these countries could also help to explain the rise in online demand in the UK and Australia. The importance of online channels of transmission of reputation has affected, as Ilan (2020, p. 997) notes, ‘many spheres of social life’, including forms of ‘street culture’ which have responded to ‘the advent of digital media and social networks’ with ‘[q]uestions of identity and reputation [...] now negotiated within a framework of omnipresent digital recording devices and all-saturating social media platforms’. The world of online, digital, and social media has transformed the ‘interaction markets’ and ‘material markets’ that Collins (2004, pp. 141–182) first examined in terms of interaction ritual theory and forms of cultural capital. In terms of chains of interaction rituals, individuals are drawn to cultural and material encounters that will be most emotionally and socially rewarding. So to return to the case of Xanax, through forms of cultural reputational amplification via music, Xanax may be perceived as reaching new levels of appeal in terms of style or aestheticism in combination with the clearly antinomian association it already has. As the rap – or drill and grime (Fatsis, 2019; Ilan, 2020, p. 995) or other – music movements win audiences and affiliations, so will substances associated with them, as has happened before in the cultural construction of other musical scenes and their associated rituals and paraphernalia (Shapiro, 1999; South, 1999b).

Drug consumption, besides being a practice undertaken under the umbrella of drug subcultures, is also a practice that represents ideas (discourses, fashions, etc.) in the culture of consumerism in which people engage daily. Consumption of products conveys symbolic meaning, and group identities are created based on their meaning and the norms and values we do or do not want to be associated with (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 2017). Identity has become a reflection of ‘lifestyles’ closely associated with commercial brands and the commodities they are labelling, as well as the context in which we purchase and consume them (Brisman and South, 2014). Therefore, the interaction rituals of drug consumption (Collins, 2011), what we choose to consume, and the way we consume it all represent our own interpretations of ‘self’ and of the social categories that we feel we belong to, based on consumption goods that symbolise the values we identify with.

## **Conclusion**

There is much continuity between traditional offline and new online markets, but one key feature of online markets is that they move beyond the physical geography that constrained the old and offer new spaces of virtual bazaars protected

by cryptological security. The technologies of online presentation mean drug distributors have a medium in which they can use textual and visual advertising for their products and services, leading to an extensive use of marketing and branding techniques (Craciunescu, 2020; Fleetwood and Chatwin, 2023, Chapter 8). They can now offer consumer-friendly services such as photographs, ‘customer information’, and ‘time to browse’ and also design advertising of psychoactive substances rooted in consumption ideas and images reflecting contemporary cultural movements and lifestyle aspirations. With the use of branding and brands in the offline and online drug economy, drug sellers are borrowing values and concepts familiar to consumers from their everyday activities, a process which reduces the significance of a distinction between buying drugs online and buying any other lifestyle consumer product online (Craciunescu, 2020).

Drug market entrepreneurs wanting the trust of customers and repeat business may simply follow the strategies of legitimate markets to generate brand fidelity and aim to create an association between certain values and certain brands to build the recognition of the products or substances for sale. This reflects the wider cultural normalisation of drugs as a result of drug references in marketing and media (South, 1999a, 1999b), and also highlights how drug cultures assimilate cultural trends from the overall society, as Sandberg (2013a) points out in his definition of subcultures. None of this should be surprising when we remember the staging posts – the actors and ideologies, the organisational innovations, and technologies – that have marked the journey from Californian counterculture to cyberspace.